DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 189 FL 023 396

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TITLE Jan Komensky--The Teacher of Nations. Occasional Papers, 18.
INSTITUTION Southampton Univ. (England). Centre for Language Education.
PUB DATE Jan 94
NOTE 20p.; Inaugural speech for the Southampton Comenius Centre (Southampton, England, United Kingdom, December 4, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Biographies; Change Strategies; College Role; *Educational Change; Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; *Educational Research; Epistemology; Equal Education; Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; Language Role; Parent Role; Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages; Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS *Comenius (Johann Amos); *Europe

ABSTRACT

The speech, given to commemorate the tercentenary of the visit of Jan Komensky (Johann Amos Comenius--the latinised form of his name) to England, outlines the educational reforms suggested by him and chronicles his life. Komeny, born in 1652 in southeast Moravia, was personally affected throughout his life by war and disease and traveled about Europe, writing profusely about education. Komeny was interested in acquisition of native and second languages, and was a pioneer in insisting on the importance of early second language instruction. Another area of concern for him was the state of higher education, which then took as its purpose the transmitting of existing knowledge, not creation or questioning of it. He made plans for a Universal College, more diverse in composition than any other, which would enable scholars to experiment freely and exchange discoveries across national frontiers. Among his ideas about education were also these: equality of opportunity for children; equal opportunities for women; education beginning at birth; need for education for parenthood; and a number of current approaches to second language teaching and learning, including use of visual aids, direct association of language and referent, functional vocabulary, and use of concrete examples rather than abstract rules. A 25-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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ED 389 189

CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

OCCASIONAL PAPERS, 18

JAN KOMENSKY - THE TEACHER OF NATIONS

INAUGURAL LECTURE FOR THE SOUTHAMPTON COMENIUS CENTRE, 4 DECEMBER 1993

ERIC HAWKINS

JANUARY 1994

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

On December 4th 1993, the University of Southampton and La Sainte Union College of Higher Education jointly launched the Southampton Comenius Centre, with access points to resource collections in the libraries of the two institutions.

There are now eleven Comenius Centres across the country, acting as outposts of CILT, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research. The expanding network that these represent enables national bodies with interests in foreign language teaching, embassies, professional associations for teachers, and broadcasting agencies, to develop their services to teachers through displays of materials, conferences and training courses. The Co-ordinators in Southampton are:

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This Occasional Paper is the text of the Inaugural Lecture by Professor Eric Hawkins. It considers the work of Comenius as an educator and a linguist, and relates his work to the demands that will be faced by the new Centre. We are most grateful to Professor Hawkins for permission to circulate his text.

JAN KOMENSKY - The Teacher of Nations

The Cambridge Conference, October 1941

On the 24th of October 1941 an extraordinary conference was convened by the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. Its purpose was to commemorate the tercentenary of the visit to England of the Czech reformer and teacher, Jan Komensky - 'the teacher of nations', as Thomas Masaryk called him.

The conference brought together the cream of Britain's scholars, distinguished educators, like J L Paton, former High Master of Manchester Grammar School, and J B Conant, the President of Harvard, famous writers like H G Wells and official representatives from most of the countries of Europe. A gathering of this calibre would have been remarkable at any time but at that moment in the war Britain stood alone, facing a Europe held in Hitler's grip from Norway to the Pyrenees, her cities blitzed nightly, the U-boat blockade threatening her food supplies. At such a time the conference had a special resonance.

It was opened by Eduard Benes, president in exile of what Chamberlain had called, two years earlier, ..'*that small far-off country of which we know little'.*

Benes described Komensky in these words: '*...one of the most famous sons of the Czechoslovak people who left his country in 1628 and travelled for more that 40 years across the whole of Europe, working without rest for the salvation of his nation, as well as for his scientific and educational plans... he was deeply venerated by all Czechs, particularly now when we are fighting for the same ideals for which he fought three centuries ago'.*

Such an eloquent tribute, you might think, could owe something to patriotism, coming from President Benes, but the tributes from Britain's scholars were equally warm. Joseph Needham F.R.S., England's most distinguished bio-chemist and later world-famous historian of Chinese science, introducing the Report of the conference (1), wrote as follow:

'....his influence was predominant in religion, in science, in education and in international politics. Komensky represented all the ideas which have successfully triumphed in modern education: he was in favour of the education of women, he was against class distinctions in the school, he wanted to introduce science, music and handwork at the expense of the Latin grammar which was at the time universally learnt by heart, he desired schools to be happy workshops of humanity (in his own words) rather than the torture chambers of youth that they were...He had no fear that true religion and true science would ever conflict'.

And J L Paton reminded the Conference ...*'Comenius was both practitioner and thinker...over half the schools of Europe used his text-books (on language teaching) which were translated into some seventeen languages'.*

What lay behind this glittering reputation? The visit to London in 1641 is a good starting point.

Komensky as practitioner and thinker

Reform in the classroom

The invitation to London in 1641 came from a group, led by Samuel Hartlib and Bishop John Williams of Lincoln, later Archbishop of York. Hartlib was a German exile, settled in London. Historians have commented on the closeness of contacts between Britain and Europe at that time owing to the frequent movement of religious and political refugees in both directions. John Locke, for example, had met Comenius in Holland at a time when it was safer for Locke to be out of England.

Hartlib's group were anxious to reform education both at school and at higher level. Comenius had addressed both levels. As practitioner, he wanted, above all, to make schools more attractive places for children, with a richer curriculum. But he also had a more far-reaching message, concerning the teacher's role. For he was an empiricist. As J L Paton put it: *'at a time when his contemporaries were still learning their natural history from Aristotle and other authorities, he preferred to trust to observation. If a question arose as to how many legs a caterpillar has, they would settle the argument not by catching a caterpillar but by seeing what the great authorities said on the point'.*

The two approaches are epitomised in the story of the aged Galileo, forced by the Inquisition, in 1633, to recant what observation through his telescope had shown him, that the earth revolves round the sun, and is not, as the Council of Trent had insisted, the centre of the universe. As the old man, still on his knees, after his humiliation, shuffled back into the crowd, he was heard to mutter into his beard: '*Eppur si muove!*' 'I know the damned thing moves'.

Trusting solely to observation was liberating but the empiricists went further and claimed that 'nothing can enter the mind except by observation, that is, via the senses' (see the watchword '*nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuit in sensu*' at the foot of the title page of the *Orbis Pictus).* They concluded that the infant's mind at birth must be a tabula rasa. It was this doctrine that was challenged in the 1960s by Noam Chomsky (2). He maintained that the facts of mother tongue acquisition can only be explained if children are born with an innate set of expectations about the language they were going to meet; a 'grammar searching mechanism' he called it, or as it is generally called now, a 'language acquisition device' or LAD. Psychologists, led by Jerome Bruner (3), while broadly accepting this, have argued that Chomsky's LAD, though necessary, can only carry the child so far. It may enable the acquisition of a basic communicative competence, but something more is needed for success in school, and especially in secondary school. Bruner calls it 'analytic competence'. For this the LAD must be supplemented by a LASS or Language Acquisition Support System, ie in the family or the community, in patient, unhurried, one-to-one dialogue. It is a very similar conclusion to that argued by the brilliant young Russian L S Vygotsky (4) in his *Thought and Language* in the 1930s.

The debate has sometimes been muddling for foreign language teachers, especially when so-called acquisition, by the LAD, has been contrasted with conscious learning. Teachers have been invited to imagine their pupils bringing to the foreign language class the same innate LAD, or set of expectations, that they brought (at birth) to getting the mother tongue.

This out of date, muddled notion, has now been superseded. Recent work in Paris (5), for example, has focused attention on the way in which the experience of getting the mother tongue itself sets up expectations about how language works, producing, at age 11+, a much modified 'LAD Mark 2'.

Such expectations about how language works vary greatly from child to child. How great this variation is my colleague Peter Green (6) found in his work at York on the language aptitude of 11 year olds. Attention now begins to focus on the links between mother-tongue learning, and aptitude for foreign language acquisition in the secondary school. Comenius was a pioneer in insisting on the importance of early language and I would like to come back to the Paris research and its lessons at the end of my paper.

Reform at University Level - The Ideal of the Universal College

At the research level Comenius reflected a general dissatisfaction throughout Europe with the state of the universities, which did not take kindly to 'trusting to observation'. They saw their role as transmitting a body of authoritative knowledge, rather than questioning it. Not all universities went as far as Salamanca, where, in 1577, the study of anatomy was discontinued on the grounds that it was unchristian. But in most universities there was little experiment and research funds were scarce.

Oxford and Cambridge were no exception. The state of teaching there was deplored by John Hall (7) in his 'humble address to Parliament' in 1649. '*Where*', he asked, '*can one find at Oxford or Cambridge ....any examination of old tenets....any disquisition into history....or*' (in a plea that will strike a chord with foreign language teachers) where could one find.....'*a more ready and generous teaching of tongues*'. To ask for *'A more ready and generous teaching of tongues'* at Oxford and Cambridge was certainly optimistic and it would be more than three centuries before John Hall's plea met any response from Oxbridge.

Following Francis Bacon, Comenius had developed his own reform programme, under the title of Pansophia, in his main book, *The Great Didactic* (8).

Comenius's central idea was to create what he called a Universal College, more diverse in its composition than any other university, which would enable scholars to experiment freely and to exchange their discoveries across national frontiers. He offers this description of such a college in Chapter 31 of the Great Didactic:

....'A school of schools, or Didactic College...whose scholars would....spread the light of wisdom throughout the human race with greater success than has heretofore been attained, and benefit mankind by new and useful inventions....this Universal College would bear the same relation to other schools that a belly bears to the other members of the body, that of a living laboratory supplying sap, vitality and strength to all'.

A suitable motto, perhaps, for the new Comenius Centre: '*supplying sap, vitality and strength*' to language teaching?

In London, plans for such a Universal College were, in fact, well advanced in 1641. A possible site, at Chelsea, had been surveyed and plans for a building drawn. The plan, however, needed the backing of Parliament and Hartlib and

his friends looked to Comenius to carry the debate. In the event, the imminence of Civil War frustrated all their plans. Comenius, seeing little prospect of Hartlib's plan going forward, used his time in London to compose his tract *Via Lucis* (9). It was in this paper, which he dedicated to Hartlib, that he advocated the creation of an international auxiliary language, to make it easier for scholars to communicate the new learning across national frontiers.

Though the immediate plan for a Universal College fell through, Comenius is acknowledged to be the Godfather both of the Royal Society, founded in London in 1662, and the Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences, set up by Frederick I of Prussia in 1700. Frederick's ally in setting up the Berlin Academy was Leibnitz, who was strongly influenced by Comenius.

While Comenius was in England, he received three other pressing invitations. From Richelieu in France, who had founded the Académie Française in 1635; from USA, where the University of Harvard, set up in 1636, wanted Comenius for its Rector, and from Sweden. There the Chancellor, Oxenstierna, wished him to reform the Swedish school system.

Seeing more prospect of making progress there, Comenius left London in June 1642 to begin a six year, and equally frustrating, stay in Sweden, where he wished to build Pansophia but found his hard-headed hosts rather narrowly interested in improving the teaching of Latin.

A life of unceasing struggle

So who was this teacher whose advice was sought throughout Europe?

When the London invitation reached him he was living at Leszno in Poland, Bishop of an exiled protestant sect called the Unity of Brethren. He was in his fiftieth year. He had seen years of persecutions and up-rootings that would have destroyed a man of less resilience.

Jan Komensky was born in March 1592 in the Czech-speaking village of Nivnice, in South East Moravia, one of four children of the village miller. His father was a respected member of the Unity of Brethren, a sect noted, J E Sadler (10) tells us, for its sobriety and virtue. Jan's early years were happy but when he was twelve there came the first of many personal blows, with the death of both his parents and two of his sisters, victims of the pestilence which devastated Bohemia.

The orphan drifted for four unhappy years, during which the town of Straznice, where he was living, was burned to the ground by wandering marauders. He received little serious schooling, until, when he was sixteen, he was sent by the Brethren to the Grammar School they ran at Prerov. Here the rector took him in unofficially as his son, and gave him the additional name of Amos, meaning 'loving'. The latinised form of his name therefore became Johann Amos Comenius.

After study at the Calvinist Academy at Herborn in Nassau and a year at Heidelberg, he was welcomed back to his old school as teacher and at the age of twenty-four he was ordained as minister of the Brethren.

Two years later he was appointed to his own church at Fulnek in Northern Moravia. He married Magdalena, daughter of the Burgomaster of Prerov, a child was born. The sun seemed to be shining again.

Then came two tragic blows. The Thirty Years War broke out in Bohemia in 1618, and a savage persecution of non-catholics began. Comenius was one of the first to be hunted down. He had to leave his church and go into hiding.

When one reads of the savagery of the civil war that ensued, made worse by the waves of pestilence that followed the fighting, it evokes comparisons with the present barbarity of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia.

Comenius was greatly moved by the callousness shown by both sides. It left him with a detestation of war and motivated his life-long effort to teach that there must be a better way. He then suffered another tragic blow, with the death from pestilence of this young wife and two children. This marked him deeply. He had looked forward to the joy of sharing and guiding his own children's learning. The blow strengthened his life-long effort to make early learning a happy and fulfilling experience for all children.

There followed seven years of wandering from one hiding place to another, taking refuge with any protestant family that would shelter him. (One of his hiding places, J E Sadler tells us, was Brandys in the lovely valley of the Orlice River, which has now been re-named Komensky Valley.) Finally, in 1628, hoping to keep his church alive and find a refuge where he could write and teach in peace, he led a large band of the Brethren over the mountains to Leszno in Poland, where he found a protector in the local protestant lord, Rafael Leszcynski. Leszno became the nearest he had to a home for the next twenty-eight years. From there he made sorties, facing all manner of dangers and discomforts on the road, and by sea, to England and Sweden, as we have seen, and in 1650, to Hungary. In all these ventures he was disappointed in his dream of founding a Pansophic community of scholars.

Back in Poland further set-backs awaited him, with the brutal sacking of Leszno in 1656 by Polish troops. When the troops arrived he just had time to bury his books and manuscripts before escaping to the woods with nothing but the clothes he wore. He then went through incredible hardships before finding haven in Amsterdam. Here he lived out his remaining years. Sadler tells that in some ways his last fourteen years were the most remarkable. Superficially they were years of frustration, with all his dreams of Pansophia in ruins, his associates like Hartlib preceding him to the grave and his own health precarious, for he was riddled with sciatica. But he showed indomitable courage in continuing to raise funds for the scattered remnants of the Church of the Brethren. He also found the strength to compose his *Angelus Pacis* - an extraordinarily far-sighted appeal to the European Powers at the Breda Conference to establish a 'peace league' of European nations.

The end came in 1670. He was buried at the French Reformed Church of Naarden on the Zuyder Zee.

How he managed to write so much in this nomadic exile is hard to understand. It has been estimated that of the two hundred books and papers he is known to have written, over fifty have been lost. Some have only been discovered in our own day.

Of this formidable output, though Pansophia was the dream that inspired him, it was through his text-books that he had the more lasting influence. By the time he died his text-books were in use in half the schools in Europe and they were translated into seventeen languages.

Something of the man himself can be gathered from the letters he wrote home to the Brethren from London. They have been collected in a scholarly edition by Fitzgibbon Young (11) and I cannot resist quoting from them. One of the qualities they reveal is Comenius's extraordinary modesty.

Comenius in London

When Hartlib's invitation to visit London came, in 1641, Comenius had no money for the fare, and Hartlib had to send the money before he could book his sea passage. The journey itself was hazardous. He reached London without luggage, poorly dressed and penniless. It was impossible to present him to the Bishop of Lincoln dressed as he was, so Hartlib called in his own tailor to make Comenius a decent suit. Comenius artlessly tells how, now properly dressed in the costume of an English divine, he finally met the Bishop. The latter enquired how he was going to support himself financially while in London. When Comenius explained that in his church individuals did not possess private wealth, the Bishop generously offered to make him a grant of £120 sterling for a year. Comenius then explained that he could not accept without first consulting the Brethren in Poland. The revealing letter goes on: ...*'after dinner the Bishop proffering me his right hand, placed ten King James pieces into mine, at which so large bounty I greatly marvelled'.* And this was the man whose books were in use in half the schools of Europe.

In another letter he notes the widespread interest in the use of shorthand, in seventeenth century England. *'London has 120 parish churches and in all of them.....there is such as crowd that space is insufficient. A large number of men and youths copy out the sermons with their pens. Some 30 years since (in King James's reign) they discovered an art which has now come into vogue even among the country folk, that of rapid script (tacygraphia) which they call stenography...For this they employ symbols (characters) signifying whole words, and not single letters of the alphabet.*

'Almost all of them acquire this art of rapid writing, as soon as they have learnt at school to read the Scriptures in the vernacular. It takes them about another year to learn the art of shorthand'.

Another letter throws light on the decline of Latin as the lingua franca of scholars and growing confidence in use of the vernacular. He notes:....*'They have an enormous number of books on all subjects in their own language ... There are truly not more bookstalls in Frankfurt at the time of the fair than there are here every day. Bacon's work De Scientiarium Augmentis has recently appeared in English'.*

Comenius and present problems

This, then, was a man of great modesty, but of towering reputation in his day. But why should he interest present day teachers, and why give his name to your Centre? How relevant are his ideas for us now?

Jean Piaget (12), in the collection of Comenius's writings that he edited in 1957 for UNESCO, has this warning: *'Nothing is easier, or more dangerous, than to treat an author of three hundred years ago as modern and claim to find in him the origins of contemporary or recent trends of thought...'*

But he goes on to suggest that it *is* legitimate to ask, about our present school system, some of the searching questions that Comenius asked in his day.

Equality of opportunity for all children

One such question concerned equal opportunity in school. To quote J L Paton again: *'he was the first great democrat among educational thinkers'.* Comenius wrote: *'it is undesirable to create distinctions or to give some children grounds for considering their own lot with satisfaction and that of others with scorn.....why should we assume that only the sons of the rich are able to fill the same positions as their fathers?'* In his own school in Poland, Sadler tells us, he made special provision to ensure that the poor as well as the better-off could learn.

I think he would be saddened, were he to come back now, to find how little progress we have made in this area.

If he were now asked to give advice to Parliament, as he was in 1641, I think one suggestion he might make is that if all Government ministers were to send their children to state schools, it would be more effective in quickly raising standards than any number of published league tables.

Equal opportunities for women

On another kind of equality he was also centuries before his time. He wanted full equality for women. In the *Great Didactic* he writes:... *'No reason can be given why the other sex should be wholly shut out from liberal studies; equally are they in God's image; equally are they furnished with minds agile and capable of wisdom, yea often beyond our sex; equally is there the possibility of attaining high distinction.'* (Fitzgibbon Young points out, intriguingly, that when this passage came to be translated into English, where Comenius had called women, in Latin: 'the other sex', the English translator rendered it as: 'the weaker sex'. Prejudice dies hard.)

Education starts at birth

Another of his key ideas that has a contemporary ring is his insistence that education begins at birth. His *Schola Infantiae* (13) is a carefully thought-out plan for the first six years of life. It is hard to believe that it was written more than 100 years before Pestalozzi was born. He stressed the significance, for the child's whole attitude to life, of first impressions, of the mother's voice, her smile, her patience ... *'by the tales told at their mother's knee'*, he wrote, *'do men live or die'.* For this reason we must do all we can to make early education attractive. From the first the child should see books as a source of pleasure. In short he wanted all children to enjoy the rich experience that we would nowadays call good nursery education.

Need for education for parenthood

It followed from this, and it is an insight that is poignantly relevant to the recent terrible tragedy in Liverpool, that *if* the early years are so important, then it behoves us, as a society, to take very seriously the education of young parents for their demanding role. This, too, he spelt out in his *Schola Infantiae.* It is dawning on us slowly that good parenting is the most demanding role that any adult is called on to perform. It calls for more difficult decisions and is more time consuming, if well done, than any professional job. Yet many young people, often just out of school, face parenting without having themselves experienced a good home. They must somehow learn how to do it, alone, harassed, in an overcrowded kitchen, without support or guidance.

This has special importance for linguists. One of the family's chief roles in society is the transmission of the mother tongue to the next generation. The crux of this process is, as Wells' recent research reaffirms, 'interaction' with a caring adult. Jean Armstrong's account, in Halsey's Educational Priority (14), of her experiment in a mining village in South Yorkshire, shows that when parents learn to listen sensitively to the baby's developing language it can be the basis from which much else in good parenting can spring. The author of the *School of Infancy* would surely see a gaping hole here in our National Curriculum.

Foreign Language teaching

If we now turn to an area of the curriculum that specially interested him, that of language teaching, I think there would be much in our foreign language classrooms that he would warm to. His very attractive text-book, the *Orbis Pictus* (15) embodies many features that have become commonplace. (Unfortunately, Charles Hoole, his English translator, explains, the illustration, woodcuts in the Amsterdam edition and metal engravings in the English version, made the book too expensive. Copies cost five shillings, or £25 at present rates, and he had to give up using the book in his London Grammar School). To list the innovations summarily:

i. teach the language directly by means of visual aids

ii. number parts of the picture to facilitate direct association of language and referent

iii. use a reduced, functional vocabulary

iv. trust to numerous examples rather than abstract rules

v. induce rules from examples rather than deducing sentences from rules learnt by heart...so 'percept before precept, exemplar before rule' ie. meet the language in context before discussing the structure, not vice versa.

Comenius went on to suggest that pupils should make their own copies of his pictures and even colour them in, as an aid to learning the vocabulary.

Comenius would be delighted with the imaginative and attractive materials now in use in our classes and thrilled by the technological marvels that now make

it possible to present the authentic language to our pupils on cassette and video.

Pupil performance in foreign languages - a striking contrast

As to how pupils perform at foreign languages, I think Comenius would be struck by the contrast between the successes in our system (witness the splendid examples at the Young Linguists Festival organised by the Association for Language Learning at Warwick, which goes from strength to strength) and the general level achieved by our school leavers. A study by the European Commission in 1987 (16) compared the conversational competence of a weighted sample of 12,000 adults and 5,000 young people (ages 15-25) across the member nations of the European Commission. Luxembourg, perhaps predictably, came top. The UK, jointly with Ireland, occupied the bottom place. Comenius might see this contrast as one more facet of inequality of opportunity, which the National Curriculum, as at present planned, exacerbates.

Three holes in the National Curriculum

i. *The need for intensive immersion for all learners*

Of all the subjects in the curriculum, the modern language offers the clearest example of unequal opportunity. As the Schools Council Working Paper 28 showed twenty years ago (17), it is in the foreign language classroom that inequalities in pupils' home background most obviously affect pupils chances. It is not hard to see why.

As Comenius saw, getting a foreign language involves broadly two kinds of learning. Insight into the grammar is vital, not only because it economises the learning, but because it arms learners, especially as they encounter more complex language, both spoken and written, with helpful *expectations* concerning what to look out for in future encounters with the language. But grammatical awareness, with the expectations it provides, though essential, is not enough. What makes new language stick for the learner, is its active use about things that matter to the learner, and not just to the teacher or the text-book writer (real 'speech acts'or 'performance' as opposed to mere 'rehearsal').

The originality of the *Orbis Pictus* is that it offers the vocabulary and structures for such real speech acts, in meaningful dialogue across a range of out-of-class activities. And for Comenius the right order was: 'active use first, grammar second' or 'percept before precept, exemplar before rule'.

Of course Comenius was teaching Latin as a second language, not a foreign language. He could assume that learners would meet Latin in meaningful use outside school, though this diminished during his lifetime, as he noted in the letter from London that we have quoted. Our teachers of French, German, or Spanish are in a difference position. They cannot assume widespread use of the language outside the school gates.

They are like swimming instructors who know that, though exercises on the bank are useful, even necessary, their pupils must get into the water, and find that it supports them, if they are to learn to swim. If it is the spoken language that we aim to teach, our swimming bath is across the Channel.

There can be few foreign language teachers who will not agree that their own mastery of the *spoken* language only raced ahead when they went abroad.

Disadvantage increased by recent exam reforms

Insistence on the spoken language in public exams is a recent development. In the 30s, 40s, and 50s, public exams and university degree courses were almost exclusively tests of the written language, without any serious use of spoken language. So it was immersion in books and in the library that was the learner's swimming bath. And access to school and public libraries did not depend on family background.

The more we have pressed for the spoken language to be tested, the more we have disadvantaged those children whose home background makes it hard to go abroad for lengthy immersion in the spoken language or to invite foreigners into the home. I think the question Comenius would ask is: what plans have you to make available for ALL your pupils, and especially the 60% who hitherto have dropped their language at age 14+, to get the immersion in the spoken language that is currently the privilege of the few. Without immersion opportunity, he would say, I am sure, your National Curriculum course for such pupils risks being a sham.

My own view is that getting all, or even most, of out Fourths and Fifths abroad will prove impossible in the present economic climate. Alternative forms of immersion must be found. One solution is the provision in local centres of intensive immersion sessions, carefully bespoke dovetailed with school programmes. In such centres necessary materials and technological aids can be concentrated, and a high ratio of informants to learners can be provided, using native speaking assistants as well as Sixth Formers who have been abroad, and university undergraduates and post-graduates. Such 'tailor-made' immersion experience may turn out to be even more effective than trips abroad which dovetail less accurately with work in the school or evening class.

Comenius would see your new Centre, I think, as an exciting contribution to the solution of a crucial problem.

ii. *A house without roof or foundations*

Comenius's next concern would be that the foreign language in the National Curriculum is a house without either roof or foundations.

(a) *Lack of a roof*

The present obligatory course to 16+ offers no clear road ahead, either for those 60% of pupils who have hitherto dropped the language at 14+, and who will leave school at 16+, or for more able entrants to the Sixth Form.

What is to motivate pupils who intend to leave at 16+ if employers and Trades Unions and those who plan apprenticeship course show no more interest in their language skills than hitherto? And what is to motivate more able Sixth Formers, anxious to get good grades in their 3 "A levels", to continue with their foreign language unless we broaden the Sixth Form curriculum?

Comenius would, I feel sure, have done his homework and he would have read the Leathes Committee Report to the Prime Minister on language teaching (18), which, as long ago as 1918, strongly recommended that all Sixth Formers, whatever their main subjects, should keep up the study of a foreign language (and incidentally of English language) to the age of 18.

It was in response to Leathes, that the Sixth Form Subsidiary subjects were introduced. By 1949, when these were axed without consultation with the schools, far more Sixth Formers each year took French Subsidiary than took French Main. The effect of the 1949 decision was exacerbated by the ill-considered action of the universities in the 1960s, in dropping the foreign language entry requirement. This was followed by a catastrophic fall-off in Sixth Form foreign language studies from which we have never recovered, with its implications for teacher shortages in the mid 1990s. Our National Curriculum house badly needs attention to the roof.

(b) A 'foundation subject' without foundation

Ours is the only so-called 'foundation subject' which is not begun until age 11. The Martin Harris Committee (19), charged with planning the foreign language curriculum , advised that careful thought should be given to devising a policy for the earlier stage, in consultation with primary colleagues. What kind of foundation should we look for?

Many language teachers might wish, ideally, to replicate the brave French Pilot Project (20) launched exactly thirty years ago by the Conservative Minister for Education, Sir Edward Boyle, while taking care to profit from all the lessons of its alleged failure. But that way forward is blocked, by shortage of suitably trained teachers and because, in the present economic and intellectual climate, it is unrealistic to expect the generous, forward-looking leadership that was provided in 1963 by that paragon of Education Ministers. But there is another way forward, which in no way supersedes the ideal, one suggested by Comenius's key idea that the mother tongue is the foundation on which all the rest of schooling must build.

But if we are to build anything on mother tongue foundations, we must first face up to a harsh reality. The sad truth is that very many of our children, perhaps the majority, are simply not learning their mother tongue beyond a very superficial level.

Failure to master the mother tongue

Twenty years ago the Bullock Committee (21) was set up to examine this problem. What jerked the government into action was the report of the National Child Development Study (22) which found that, to quote just one statistic, the ratio of poor readers at age 7 was as follows:

- for category 1 children (the administrative class): 1 in 12
- for category 5 children (the least skilled home backgrounds): 1 in 2.

And Bullock found that for every year children spend at school this discrepancy between children from different backgrounds increases. The effect of schooling is to increase, not decrease, relative disadvantage.

Since Bullock, repeated studies have shown how the life chances of substantial numbers of our children, perhaps even a majority, are being stunted by failure to achieve what Bruner called 'analytic competence' in the mother tongue. Mere communicative competence is not enough. It is this failure that closes doors to Sixth Form studies and so to any kind of professional career.

Comenius insisted that the mother tongue is the foundation on which the rest of schooling must build. This was a revolutionary idea. Only education in Latin had been valued. Furthermore, it was the importance he gave to the mother tongue that made the early years so vital. But study of the mother tongue ought not to end at infancy. Thorough mastery takes a life-time. Comenius observed how even the supposedly well-educated are not really *aware* of the loose way they use language. Most people, he said....'*commonly do not speak, but babble: that is they transmit not as from mind to mind...but exchange between themselves words not understood or little or ill understood.*' (And he gives examples of words commonly exchanged without real awareness of their meaning: *God...Sin....Virtue.*) '*...not only the common folk do this, but even the well educated for the most part....we are all nought but sounding brass and tinkling cymbals as long as words not things (the husk of words, I say not the kernels of meaning) be in our mouths*' (23). Anyone who has listened to current debates in Parliament and elsewhere (e.g. Ireland) will recognise Comenius's 'husks, not kernels of words' used to generate heat rather than light. Comenius would have approved the recommendation of Leathes in 1918 that no Sixth Formers, whatever their specialist subjects might be, should abandon the study of their mother tongue.

But why should this complacency, about the failure of our school leavers to achieve true 'awareness' in mastery of the mother tongue, concern *foreign* language teachers?

Recent studies suggest that it concerns us very directly. To quote the late Professor Pit Corder (24): '*It is somehow counter-intuitive to suggest that the second language learner starts from scratch, that he is in effect learning language all over again. Does the fact that he already possesses language and is a language user count for nothing?*'

I come back to the Paris research that I mentioned earlier. Madame Christiane Luc (5) and her colleagues at the Institut National De Recherche Pédagogique argue the need to develop what they call a propédeutique or preparation for foreign language learning. With Danielle Bailly, a psycholinguist from the Sorbonne, they describe an experiment in Parisian schools in which teachers set out to raise pupils' language awareness, or grammatical consciousness, what they call: '*leur prise de conscience des phénomènes linguistiques*'. One thing the experiment showed was that there is a place for 'talking about the foreign language' as opposed to 'talking in the language' and it should not be dismissed dogmatically as some authorities have done recently.

A well-planned programme of 'preparation' for foreign language learning, conducted in the mother tongue, would have other important elements. One would be what the late Peter MacCarthy (25) called 'education of the ear'. So many children simply have not learned to listen, because learning to listen begins with one-to-one dialogue with an attentive adult; it is by being listened to that the child learns to listen. Real listening cannot be learnt in noisy peer-group encounters or by watching the Television.

Another element in the 'propédeutique' is what the Paris researchers call: '*une plasticité d'accueil aux langues étrangères*'. A confidence and zest in going to meet strange sounds and structures, lack of which is closely linked with feelings of social (and masculine) insecurity underlying the relative failure of adolescent boys in language classrooms.

The mother tongue is the only medium in which the 'propédeutique' can operate, so the first requirement is that foreign language teachers must work closely with primary teachers and with their English teaching colleagues in secondary school.

Comenius took it for granted that all a child's varied language experiences must interact and inform each other. He would be astonished to see English and foreign language teachers being trained in distinct degree courses, seldom seeing their tutors cooperate across faculty boundaries, and once in their schools, never going into each other's classes to hear what was being said about language. Only the unfortunate pupil, commuting from one sealed off class to the other, hears the discordant messages being issued about the central part of the curriculum on which all else depends, and tries, without any help, to make a synthesis.

But I would not wish to conclude on a despondent note. Comenius would not have done so. Already in the area I have been discussing, Professor Brumfit and his colleagues at Southampton have given a national lead, on which your new Comenius Centre will build. The warmest congratulations are due to those who have worked hard to make this day possible.

So my wish for you is that the shade of Comenius, that brave, modest and farsighted teacher, will go with you and watch over the work of your new Centre and inspire you, in his own memorable words: '*to give sap, vitality and strength*' to the language teachers of your region.

Joh. Amos Comenius (Jan Komensky) 1592-1670

Salient dates:

1592 Jan Komenský born, March 28, in village of Nivnice, near Uhersky Brod in Eastern Moravia; father the village miller; member of protestant sect: Unity of Brethren of Bohemia. In correspondence and writings, the name latinised as Comenius, (spelled Commenius by Charles Hoole in his London version of the Orbis Pictus, 1659).

1604 Loses father, mother and two sisters from pestilence. Is looked after in Strásnice by aunt; unhappy at school.

1608 Sent to Latin School maintained by the Brethren in Prerov. Treated as son by Rector, Bishop Lanecky, who gives him added name of Amos (loving).

1613 One year at Heidelberg, returns to Prerov as teacher.

1616 Ordained as minister of the Unity of Brethren.

1618 Pastoral appointment to Fulnek in Northern Moravia, with direction of its school. Married Magdalena Vizovska.

1618 start of 30 Years War

1619 First child born

1620 Disaster: Protestants defeated at battle of White Mountain; Emperor Ferdinand II orders persecution of protestants by Spanish catholic mercenaries.

Pestilence kills Comenius' wife and two babies.

C. leaves his church; next 7 years spent hiding wherever he can find protection.

1628 With large band of Brethren, C. flees from Moravia to Leszno in Poland, C's home intermittently for next 28 years, during which Comenius turns increasingly to his dream of reform through Pansophy: unifying and defining all human knowledge and science, as prelude to harmony between individuals and between nations. To this end all learned men of good will should be recruited in a great 'invisible college' wider than any existing university.

1632 '*Didactica*' composed in Czech. C. consecrated Bishop.

1633 '*Janua linguarum reserata vestibulum*' published at Leszno.

1633-8 '*Didactica*' expanded in Latin from the Czech

1636 Death of protector Count Raphael Leszczynski.

1641-2 C. invited to England by Hartlib and others. Abortive plan for College.

1642-48 C. invited to Sweden by Chancellor Oxenstierna, to reform the school system. Disappointed by lack of interest in Pansophia

1648 '*Linguarum Methodus Novissima*' published at Leszno

1650 C. invited to Hungary. Again disappointed by lack of interest in Pansophia

1651 '*Schola Pansophica*' published in Hungary

1656 Sacking of Leszno by Polish troops. C. escapes into woods after burying manuscripts

1657 C. and fellow exiles invited by Oliver Cromwell to settle in Ireland. Offer declined.

1658 '*Orbis Pictus*' published at Nuremberg (illustrated version of *Janua Linguarum*).

1667 '*Angelus Pacis*' plea for 'peace league' of European nations, addressed to English and Dutch envoys at the Conference at Breda, May 1667.

1668 '*Via Lucis*' (written during stay in England) published with dedication to Royal Society (contains plan for international auxiliary language).

1670 Comenius dies Amsterdam, 15th November. Buried in the Walloon Church at Naarden.

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